

Skirting the Issue:
Interweaving Dress into Sociopolitical Histories

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Introduction

“What she actually wanted were real things, real entities, things she materially lacked, things that a culture and a social system withheld from her,” writes Carolyn Steedman in *Landscape for a Good Woman*. Reflecting back on her childhood in 1950s Britain and her mother, Steedman’s part biography, part autobiography, illustrates the frustration working class women felt in the post-war world. Despite their marginal status in society, these women refused to suffer quietly in post-war Britain; they mobilized in protest against government control of consumer goods. As Steedman explains, “when the world didn’t deliver the goods, she [Steedman’s mother] held the world to blame. In this way, the story she told was a form of political analysis, that allows a political interpretation to be made of her life.”¹ Steedman’s memoir demonstrates that government regulations pertaining to goods did not prompt a mere housewife’s complaint. Although women’s grievances regarded domestic matters in large part, women did not confine their protest to that private world. Instead, “the problems of the housewife became a major issue of contemporary debate as women registered their dissatisfaction in protests and, more importantly, through the ballot box,”² as historian Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska explains. Thus, working class women became the Conservative party’s least likely allies who helped enable the political group’s victory in 1951, reversing Labour party dominance over the previous decade.³ These consumer goods, so greatly coveted, speak

¹Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago Press, 1986): 6.

²Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc. , 2000): 98.

³ In 1951, the Conservative party won more seats than the Labour party, 321 seats over

then not to Britain's cultural context, but to its social and political moods.

This thesis seeks to provide the social history that brought about such voices as Steedman's mother's in post-war Britain, through the analysis of dress that such women wore and aspired to purchase following the end of the war. As the shoppers and makers for their families, working class women like Steedman's mother, especially felt the restrictions imposed by austerity measures and government policies. I argue a deeper understanding of how these citizens, who had generally supported the Labour government during the war, came to vote for the Conservative party following the end of the Second World War, can be reached by examining clothing in the same manner in which historians analyze critical texts. Because, even before citizens could use the 1951 elections to punish the Labour party for its failure to deliver the better Britain it had promised during the war, British working class women had already taken a stance: Christian Dior's New Look skirt.

Dior's New Look was a couture collection that embraced everything wartime fashions were not. Denounced upon its debut in 1947, the collection garnered widespread adoption and admiration by 1948. The French designer's first collection emphasized volume and the generous use of fabric, overturning wartime notions of dress that adhered

295, respectively. Although not a huge difference in number of seats, this was still seen as a significant achievement considering that the Labour party had had 393 seats versus the Conservative's 210 seats in 1945. Moreover, the Conservative party would continue to make strides in gaining majority seats over the Labour party until the latter party regained its dominance in the 1964 elections. Articles written in 1952 analyzing the elections, such as M. A. Fitzsimons, "The British Elections," *The Review of Politics* 14, no. 1 (1952), recognized the Conservative gain in seats as a sign of clear victory and success. What is also interesting to note is the fact that over 80% of eligible citizens voted. For more information see Bryn Morgan and Joseph Connelly, "Uk Election Statistics: 1945-2000," (House of Commons Library, 2001).

to the conservative and unimaginative use of resources. Initial public outrage in Britain and in other countries quickly dissipated even though the British government continued to censure such French immorality.⁴ But British women no longer cared about what the government had to say regarding Dior's New Look. Fed up with the Labour party's policies, these working class women focused on finding the means to purchase or create a New Look skirt or dress.

Yet, only a few years before, these very women were toiling in factories supporting the government's cause in the war. Working class women not only greatly contributed to the war production effort, but also agreed, albeit some more willingly than others, to sacrifice for their fighting men. As a 1940 report on women's attitudes demonstrated, "most women [had] fundamentally a deep belief in the triumph of the right," a sense of good, which served as "the justification of all her sacrifices," thus "none [had] any illusions about what [was] demanded"⁵ of her by the government. Women understood the necessity of and believed in the sacrifices made in the name of war. As a measure of their support, these women dressed in propaganda, proudly sporting Jacquard scarves imprinted with designs inspired by the Ministry of Information's posters, tying their hair back in order to comply with factory work regulations.

How then, within the span of a few short years, could such women come to resent the very administration they had supported? This question is one that has been previously

⁴Michael and Ariane Batterberry, *Mirror, Mirror: A Social History of Fashion* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977): 348. As the authors demonstrate, "the [British] government requested the British Guild of Creative Designers to boycott the Paris styles. The New Look was considered yet another act of irresponsibility on the part of France."

⁵Unknown, "Women in Wartime," in *Report* (Mass Observation, June 1940).

examined, and although crucial, not my chief concern. Instead, what this thesis demonstrates is that these women's choice of dress captures not only the cultural shifts in attitudes occurring at this time, but also, and more importantly, the sociopolitical ones. Thus, this thesis argues for the scholarly interpretation of clothing to be conducted in the same manner in which historians approach critical texts.

Objects form an integral aspect of any given culture, and provide historians with a wider group's opinion. Objects entail a part of people's "emotional, sensual, representational, and communicative expression" and thus are "not only the product of history," but "also [serve as] active agents in history," in the way in which they create and embody certain meanings.⁶ Objects are a technology with which individuals construct not only understandings of themselves, but also their worlds. Material culture reveals information about certain individuals' class, profession, identity, values, and ideology. In setting these objects alongside textual sources, historians can come to gain a more nuanced understanding of a time, place and people.

This proves especially true for clothing and the textiles from which garments are made. Dress is a particularly important source of material culture because it is worn on the body. Unlike objects in the home and office, clothing is used to cover the body and thus represent the self in every single domain one enters. Therefore, as famed psychoanalyst J.C. Flugel once said, "new fashions, if they are to be successful, must be in accordance with certain ideals current at the time they are launched,"⁷ for if not, they

⁶Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (2005): 1015.

⁷ Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Regime*, trans.

will surely fail. Fashion historians Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil explain, “dress is about a relationship between a body, garments and also urban and social space that is highly *specific*.”⁸ In dressing him or herself on a daily basis, an individual acts both consciously and unconsciously to negotiate between his or her beliefs and the environment at large. This enables the historian, time after, to read the multiple levels of individuals’ thoughts encapsulated in garments. In this manner, clothing gives material form to the cultural, social and political differences that arise between different times and places. Anthropologist Grant McCracken credits clothing and the fashion system at large with even greater significance, because unlike other forms of material culture, clothing is not only a conveyer of meaning, but is also a modest creator of meanings and an actor in the reform of meanings that Western societies constantly undergo.⁹

Self-made clothing provides even deeper insight, as was the case in post-war Britain. Mass-produced clothing was still not widespread in the 1940s so that British women, and especially working class women who could not afford designer garments, made the majority of the items they and their families wore. Wartime policies of “mend and make do” carried well into the late 1940s and early 1950s. Even if women purchased some items, they frequently mended or personalized them further. Based on popular trends and yet individually stylized further, such items embody not only public opinions, but also the embellisher’s individualistic values, providing scholars with a bounty of

Jean Birrell (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1994): 44.

⁸Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil, ed. *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 451. Emphasis my own.

⁹Grant McCracken, "Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 13, no. 1 (1986): 76.

information.

Clothing develops and expresses even greater meaning in consumer cultures. Two certain characteristics of consumer cultures render the value of objects, and especially dress, crucial: the aspect of choice and the importance of materiality. In a consumer culture, a person confronts a greater variety of choice when purchasing or creating an object. Because, in the case of dress, the individual comes to have a vast scope of designers and textiles from which to choose, what he or she eventually pulls from the closet and puts on has an increased significance. Moreover, because consumption defines consumer cultures, precisely as the term suggests, the role of material objects in society is exacerbated. As sociologist R.S. Oropesa explains, in consumer cultures, “consumer goods occupy a prominent place in the dominant mainstream ideology of the good life,”¹⁰ so that consumers living in such societies knowingly value material goods to a greater extent.

Although 1940s Britain was not a *robust* consumer culture, citizens still had more options than in other periods or places. Furthermore, wartime sacrifices also led to an enhanced longing for goods, elevating the role of material culture in the British mindset. Denial of access to consumer goods, along with plain goods in general, was worse in this society than in simpler economies, because an individual’s accessibility to such items determined his or her place in society. As historians John Brewer and Roy Porter explain, goods in a “consumer society [have] far wider significations, characterizing social orders whose expectations, whose hopes and fears, whose prospects of integration, harmony or

¹⁰R. S. Oropesa, "Consumer Possessions, Consumer Passions, and Subjective Well-Being," *Sociological Forum* 10, no. 2 (1995): 216.

dissolution, increasingly depend upon the smooth operation and continued expansion of the system of goods.”¹¹ For the British, and especially women who confronted austerity measures on a daily basis in their roles as the shoppers¹² of their families, post-war recovery could only be conceived of in terms of goods.

Nonetheless, despite the social and political meanings embedded in clothing, scholars have typically focused on clothing’s cultural value. Although intellectual interest in material culture and fashion has developed greatly in the last few decades, fashion is typically relegated to its own history or examined within the world of cultural studies. Oftentimes it is anthropologists and museum curators who write seriously on the subject and examine objects with the same consideration as textual sources.¹³ Yet, clothing is neither produced nor worn in a social and political vacuum. Clothing negotiates the social and political world in ways in which individuals cannot always explicitly do for themselves, and thus historians should consider these objects along with more traditional sources in constructing sociopolitical histories. Perhaps social anthropologist Francesca Bray says it best when she writes:

“Every human society constructs for itself a world of food, shelter, clothing and other goods,

¹¹ *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1994: 2.

¹² Women’s role as shoppers of their families is one of great significance in explaining the manner in which they experienced austerity measures. I will discuss this issue further on in my thesis.

¹³ Historians such as Giorgio Riello, James Laver, Dorothy Ko, Daniel Roche and Christopher Breward, among others have contributed greatly to the serious study of fashion. However, their works are often published as contributions to “fashion history” or “studies in design.” Anthropologists such as Sandra Niessen, Ann Marie Leshkovich, Francesca Bray, and museum curator Jacqueline Atkins, have analyzed fashion, clothing and textiles relationships to society at large. Bray especially has focused on analyzing textiles as a form of technology that helped construct women’s identities in society. This list is by no means conclusive, but just an example of some notable scholars in the field.

a domain of material experience...From these sources we can piece together a historical text that records the changing patterns and textures of social fabric...We can try to retrieve the messages conveyed by technical practices and products, to see how social roles were naturalized through that *most powerful form of indoctrination, the bodily habit*. We can set these systems of material practice and experience against written formulations of metaphysics and ethics to explore the mutual penetration of ideology and popular belief. To read this immensely rich text creatively, to recover the meanings of the shifts, negotiations and ruptures that it records, we must go beyond the terms of conventional history of technology to analyze a society's technologies as a part of a web of political and cultural practices.”¹⁴

According to Professor Bray, technology is any kind of skilled practice that makes the world livable; it is everything a person does in order to live in his or her environment. It is in examining societal technologies such as the production of textiles, the focus of her book, that the social world of a particular time and place can come to be revealed. Moreover, in analyzing such experiences along with textual sources, societies' ideologies can come to be further explored as well. Bray places the study of technologies within political contexts, apart from just social and cultural ones. For Bray, clothing, made from these technologies, is a “symbol of the human” and “the mark of civilization,”¹⁵ thus, I argue, it needs to be studied in terms of all of the customs that define man. To analyze clothing from a solely cultural perspective is to fail to capture the political and social undertones instilled in dress as well.

To demonstrate the need to study clothing with the same rigor as the analysis of critical texts, I will make evident how popular clothing items mark sociopolitical shifts in attitudes in 1940s Britain. To capture the government's ideologies during wartime Britain, I will rely on primary sources such as domestic propaganda posters, which were widely displayed throughout the Second World War, and can now be found at the Rare

¹⁴Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997): 2. Emphasis my own.

¹⁵Ibid: 190.

Books Collection of Butler Library at Columbia University. I will demonstrate how these ideologies were encapsulated in Jacqmar scarves, privately produced throughout the early 1940s and worn by women, especially those working in factories. In order to capture these women's voices and the overall mood of wartime Britain, I will look to diary entries and reports recorded in Mass Observation. A large archive begun in 1937, Mass Observation was founded with the purpose of recording British citizens' voices throughout the late 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. Although the archive is housed at the University of Sussex, earlier entries can be found online, as well as file reports written by members of the archive at that time, who compiled contemporary attitudes and trends as expressed in a plethora of diaries.

Moving forward in time, I will examine government ideologies in the latter half of the 1940s by introducing the "Britain Can Make It" exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in the fall of 1946. Put on by the Council of Industrial Design, an appendage of the British government established in 1944, the exhibition showcased a variety of new products that were intended to maintain morale in the post-war world. Ironically enough, most of the items were for export only. Mass Observation reports capture contemporary public opinions of the exhibition. By bringing these opinions together with the rise of Christian Dior's New Look in 1947, I will demonstrate how this popular fashion item reflected a shift in sociopolitical attitudes from the earlier half of the decade. I will analyze not only Dior's skirt and what it represented visually, but also women's opinions of the Look as recorded in diary entries, Steedman's memoir, and secondary sources. Steedman's work especially is of great interest, not only because of

the author's acclaimed analysis of this time, but also because of her serious engagement with material culture.

The fact of the matter is that in 1940s Britain women came "up against the hard facts of everyday life- prices, blackout, food, conscription, evacuation, air raids – and [saw] everything in these personal terms." Everything came down to "the symbols of her life,"¹⁶ so that the items women wore entailed far more than just cultural expressions. Dress, along with other goods, was an important way in which women understood their lives during this difficult moment in time. If scholars continue to minimally engage with dress, we will fail to understand this period as women experienced it back then.

Domestic Propaganda and Life in World War II Britain

Throughout the Second World War, working class women wore scarves reproducing the Ministry of Information's (MOI's) iconography displayed in domestic propaganda posters. Known as "weapons on the wall,"¹⁷ propaganda posters formed a part of the British government's arsenal used to promote ideals both at home and abroad. The posters generally aimed to maintain morale, inform civilians about safety matters, including health, mobilize women for work, and warn about the dangers of careless talk. Together these messages intended to promote a progressive, united Britain. Cyril Bird, known as Fougasse, designed perhaps one of the most famous campaigns: "Careless Talk Costs Lives." One of his posters shows women speaking in front of a wall patterned with Hitler caricatures (Figure 1) warning individuals that they did not always know who

¹⁶ Unknown, "Women in Wartime." 284.

¹⁷ Dr. Paul Vysny, "British Propaganda Posters of the Second World War," <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pv/pv/courses/posters/index.html>.

might be listening.¹⁸ Similarly, another poster portrays two men speaking on a train, with a caricatured Hitler and Goering hiding above the men among the luggage, listening in on their conversation.¹⁹ These posters made individuals wary of what they said and to whom. While these images exaggerated the presence of enemy spies amongst Brits, they demonstrated the MOI's desire to mobilize the population. This campaign affirmed the idea that in this war, unlike any other before it, a civilian's actions could influence the course of events. Britain's future lay not only in the hands of the men fighting in the army and navy, but also in the hands of those back home. Because everyone played a part in the drive for victory, or so these posters claimed, this war was represented as that of a united people.



Figure 1. "Don't forget that walls have ears!"

¹⁸ Fougasse, "Careless Talk Costs Lives," (Britain, 1940s).

¹⁹ Ibid. Other posters produced by the MOI with slogans advertising "Telling a Friend May Mean Telling the Enemy" were designed to have a similar effect; exaggerating notions of wartime enemies, particularly the Germans, infiltrating British society. These too suggested the notion that merely gossiping or speaking with another individual could have great consequences.

Furthermore, by including women in the war effort, these posters also subtly attempted to distinguish British society from the Axis countries. This enacted Voltaire's concept of identity formation, explained in his treatise *Patrie*.²⁰ Posters implied that in Britain, unlike in the enemy nations, women comprised an important part of the country. "Victory is in Your Hands," reads one such poster (Figure 2) encouraging women to join the workforce so that men could be free to join the army. Three images of women in the domestic sphere are then transformed into three new images of women doing similar work, now in factories,²¹ contributing to the war effort. The bottom reads "Tighten Your Grip- Get into WAT Work"²² next to an image of a wrench crushing a swastika in its grip; it was through these women's labor that Britain could defeat the enemy. This poster echoes the theme of civilian militarization by emphasizing war production above civilians' needs for ordinary consumer goods, to the point that the government seemed to merge the two. In doing so, this poster, along with others, made it seem as if civilians yearned for the production of military items with the same desire for the output of consumer goods. Therefore, these forms of propaganda argued that only a united Britain, with all members of society working towards the war effort, could come to defeat Hitler and his Nazis.

²⁰ In his 1752 work, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire defines the concept of *patrie* or homeland. According to the thinker, it is the human state "that to wish for one's country's greatness is to wish harm to one's neighbors." One's state cannot come to triumph without putting down another state. From: H. I. Woolf, ed., *Voltaire's Philosophical Dictionary* (London, 1923): 131-132.

²¹ Appropriately wearing headscarves as well.

²² Unknown, "'Victory Is in Your Hands'," (London, 1940s).



Figure 2. "Victory Is In Your Hands!"

Posters seeming to guarantee British victory and associate that success with British virtue, also served to differentiate and mobilize civilians. The government realized that nothing else but a moral victory, the triumph of good over evil, could justify the costs the British people were paying in this long and brutal war. Thus, the government divided the fight along such lines. For example, a poster depicting two women in uniform – one washing her face as the other applies lipstick – implies the pureness and good of the British. "Fresh and Clean Again. It's worth dirty hands to make the stuff that will beat Hitler,"²³ (Figure 3) reads the tagline, once again advancing the notion that the British were the morally "clean" camp of the war, needing to occasionally soil their hands in order to fight dirty Hitler.²⁴ Such a message also implied that the fight at home mattered

²³ ———, "'Fresh and Clean Again.'" (London, 1940s).

²⁴ Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden once said, "I have no confidence in our ability to make decent Europeans of the Germans" not so much because of the British

just as much as the one on land or at sea, militarizing all of society.



Figure 3. “Fresh and Clean Again.”

Perhaps posters utilizing Churchill’s quotes and images embody these ideals best. The Prime Minister’s leadership throughout the wars years accounted for a significant part of the Allied victory.²⁵ His speeches constituted an integral component of domestic propaganda. Churchill’s image stood for everything British in this time,²⁶ exemplifying the union of British citizens under their leader, heightened national sentiments, and the increased role of the state. Posters with Churchill’s face exclaiming “Let Us Go Forward

government’s incapacities, but more because such a task, that of cleansing Germany, was deemed an impossible feat. Philip M Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995): 221.

²⁵ Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995): 285.

²⁶ Not to mention the “John Bull” poster campaign which asked what would John do in times of war. The reference of the bulldog naturally recalled both Churchill and Great Britain. Moreover, these posters also reflected the morality imbued in these images, since following the example of John Bull could be easily perceived as a modern, secular version of following Christ’s leadership espoused by the Catholic church.

Together”²⁷ (Figure 4) asserted that when united under him, the British people and nation would move forward in every sense possible, creating a more progressive Britain.



Figure 4. “Let Us Go Forward Together.”

Similarly, posters appearing to be purely informational also served as an opportunity to imply British superiority and unity. One such instance (Figure 5) – advising citizens to take safety precautions by dressing wounds, no matter how minor – portrays the British as erect, tall caricatures fighting fat rounded Nazis.²⁸

²⁷ Unknown, ““Let Us Go Forward Together”,” (London, 1940s).

²⁸ Mendoza, ““Who Would Be Loyal to His Country Must Be Loyal to Himself.”,” (London, 1940s).



Figure 5. “Who would be loyal to his country must be loyal to himself.”

Not only does such an image assert British moral uprightness and German greed, but it also links the citizenry with the soldier, implying societal militarization. Because every civilian played a part in the drive towards victory, informational posters sought to keep the public safe, secure, and even healthy. The message was clear: the public’s well-being was vital to the war effort. Through the guise of providing useful information to the public, the MOI was able to present notions of a Britain ruled by moral righteousness and united across class and gender in the fight against the morally tainted and degraded Germans.

Although scholars, for the most part, agree upon the kinds of messages delivered by the MOI and the intentions they revealed, scholars disagree on whether the MOI’s propaganda actually captured, influenced, or even affected public opinion at all. On one side of the debate are historians such as Richard Overly who has, for example, argued that the British public must have seen these posters as literal transcriptions of their character,

not as exhortations to adopt certain behaviors. According to Overy, the “real success of the Allies lay in their ability to win the moral high ground throughout the conflict.”²⁹ Since the very beginning of the war, Chamberlain had “established the moral high ground for democratic principles” with his BBC broadcast on September 3, 1939.³⁰ Thus, for years, citizens ardently maintained homefront morale, because they believed they were fighting a *just* war and were united in their “moral revulsion at everything that the new German Reich and its leader stood for.”³¹ For the MOI this meant that domestic posters could not be understood as propaganda, because that was the arsenal the repulsive Germans used to manipulate the masses. Instead, the British population had to perceive these messages as true reflections of their character and actions, and not as efforts to mold and shape their behavior. Otherwise the war could not be portrayed as a moral battle, endangering the government’s reliance on homefront support.

Because the MOI had to appear to live up to its motto of “the truth, nothing but the truth and, as near as possible, the whole truth,”³² historian Philip M. Taylor explains that the MOI set a system of pre-censorship into place. Unlike Overy, Taylor acknowledges the MOI’s underlying motives by demonstrating that although the MOI presented its posters as “propaganda with facts,”³³ in reality the organization could not always tell the truth. The real goal, it seems, was to influence and unify the population on whom the war effort depended.

²⁹ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*: 285.

³⁰ Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*: 209.

³¹ Ibid: 23.

³² Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*: 213.

³³ Philip M Taylor, *British Propaganda in the 20th Century: Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001): 151.

Other modern historians have even more directly questioned whether the MOI's domestic posters could have really reflected British culture and attitudes during the Second World War. One such scholar, David Clampin, argues that government propaganda "fed directly into the creation of [a] myth and the subsequent perpetuation of the nostalgia that surrounds the 'People's War.'" In itself, propaganda cannot stand as evidence of people's thoughts or actions. Therefore, Clampin urges scholars to look at advertising, instead of posters, claiming advertisements offer a more reliable measure of opinion because its images were actually 'used' through the war. Thus, according to Clampin, they may well have shaped British culture in that period.³⁴ Clampin finds that because companies sought to appeal to the people's language and experiences, advertising presented a more frank notion of this time. Yet Clampin fails to see that advertising, like propaganda, was not the people's creation. Therefore, advertising too is not the best conveyer of their voices.

On the other hand, what individuals actually chose to buy comes closer to measuring what they thought. What these purchases reveal is of grave importance, especially because during the war people had reduced means of purchasing power. Studying material culture such as clothing and scarves along with domestic posters can lead to a greater understanding of the role such propaganda played in legitimizing certain ideals of British society and maintaining support for the administration and its policies. Unlike propaganda produced by the MOI or advertising created by vendors of goods,

³⁴ David Clampin, "'the War Has Turned Our Lives Upside-Down': The Merit of Commerical Advertising in Documenting the Cultural History of the British Home Front in the Second World War," *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 24, no. 2 (2008): 145.

clothing women chose to purchase, make, and/or wear provides more direct access to their beliefs regarding the social, political and economic circumstances of their time.

Material Culture in War-Era Britain

The scarves that copied or evoked propagandist imagery provide a perfect opportunity to assess the extent to which British women endorsed or absorbed such notions, because women could decide, and in fact did decide, to purchase and wear them. As anthropologist Grant McCracken explains, consumer goods “provide society with a fixed set of messages” and have the “capacity to serve in the construction of the self and world.”³⁵ Objects used daily by British citizens embody certain aspects of their everyday life and serve as a more trustworthy source of insight because they were *chosen* to be consumed and were manufactured by private industries free of any direct political intervention. Consumer goods thus fill the “gap between the ‘real’ and the ‘ideal’ in social life,” serving as “one of the devices that can be used to help in the recovery of this meaning.”³⁶ The fact that such items mirrored campaigns and notions extolled by posters during the war years illustrates that the British public adopted government ideals. In turn, the people’s decision to embrace such propaganda caused an increased sense of nationalism and a move towards the redefining of the self.

The popularity of scarves patterned with sayings and designs seen on propaganda posters indicates the British people’s involvement in perpetuating government-sponsored

³⁵ Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988): 68.

³⁶ Ibid: 105.

ideals. One of the most famous textiles in this time was the “London Wall Scarf”³⁷ (Figure 6) produced by Jacqmar, a privately owned company. The scarf featured Churchill’s statement “Give us the tools...and we’ll finish the job” along with other famous sayings of the time.³⁸



Figure 6. London Wall Scarf, Britain, 1940s.

Fougasse produced another popular series of scarves featuring his tagline “You Never Know Who’s Listening,”³⁹ which mirrored his “Careless Talk Costs Lives” poster campaign. Another design, the “On to Berlin” scarf, was even more radical since it was one of the few to carry aggressive military imagery, something rare even in domestic posters as well. That a private company produced such a scarf with tank and artillery icons, and that so many women chose to wear it, reflects the militarization of society. By willingly incorporating such iconography into their wardrobe, women adopted notions espoused by propaganda no matter how exaggerated they seemed to be. In this regard,

³⁷ Jacqmar, "London Wall Scarf," (London, 1940).

³⁸ Another popular scarf of the time was adorned with various representations of the prime minister along with several of his more famous quotes.

³⁹ Fougasse, ""You Never Know Who Is Listening" Scarf," (London, 1940).

posters did play a role in transforming ideas of Britain throughout the war period.

Scarves were also a part of the image associated to the new British woman who emerged during the war. Since safety regulations stipulated that women working in factories had to tie their hair up, scarves became a symbol of female factory workers who were making sure to do their part for victory. In the process scarves sent new messages. As one scholar explains, the war “scarf was firmly entrenched in the public imagination as a powerful signifier of female independence, emancipation and glamour,”⁴⁰ essentially the British woman made possible by the war. This woman stood apart from her German counterpart, because she was free, while her foil was oppressed and forced to deny herself every single luxury, including beauty and fashion.⁴¹ The use of scarves then symbolized the new British workingwoman that helped move forward the rightful cause of the war.

Apart from being symbolic adornments, scarves also served a functional purpose. During the Second World War, when people did not have as many choices of dress as in times of peace, scarves were one of the few ways in which people could elaborate and transform certain outfits. They were extraordinarily popular, “seen everywhere and used by everyone,”⁴² and part of their success can be attributed to the approval of Fougasse’s poster campaign, which was described as “very good”⁴³ by multiple Mass Observation

⁴⁰ Jacqueline M. Atkins and John W. Dower, *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain, and the United States, 1931-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005): 231.

⁴¹ Ibid: 207.

⁴² Ibid: 69.

⁴³ Diarist 5396, "Diary Entry," (Mass Observation, February 13, 1940). See also entries from Diarist 5275 and Diarist 5205 for example.

diarists. These scarves also existed as a part of new fashion trends made necessary and fleetingly popular by the war. Scarves functioned as accessories to the utility look developed by government-commissioned designers, which sought to manifest propagandist notions as well. The utility look even crossed class lines, because even couture designers, who served privileged clientele, were forced to comply with rationing measures. As a result, the utility look stood as another symbol of national unity, despite firmly entrenched social stratifications. The government called on these couture designers, precisely because the administration realized that the utility look would not survive unless it seemed fashionable. Although, as most scholars demonstrate, the government did not succeed in this ambition,⁴⁴ a notion echoed in multiple Mass Observation diary entries complaining about the lack of comfort or appeal in utility clothing. Nevertheless, the utility look dominated the fashion scene in the early 1940s, demonstrating the extent of the people's support of the war.

Similarly, clothing made by designers who were not government-contracted, began to mirror several utility looks as well,⁴⁵ speaking to the power of nationalism in this time. Coined "The New Look" by Vogue in 1942, not to be confused with Dior's New Look that debuted in 1947, the haute couture magazine made it clear that to look wealthy was absolutely amiss in this time. The *right* thing to wear- not just fashionably speaking, but also morally- was understated, but was still supposed to be feminine and elegant.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ One good example is Diarist 5333 "Diary Entry," (Mass Observation, February 21, 1940) who, in commenting on a job application, exclaimed, "thank goodness – not a uniformed job!"

⁴⁵ Dower, *Wearing Propaganda*: 211.

⁴⁶ Linda Watson, *Vogue Fashion* (Buffalo, New York: Firefly Books Ltd., 2008): 91.

Vogue's article seemed to directly echo the "Beauty as Duty" campaign presented in various posters. Although British women were supposed to be resourceful in this time of sacrifice, women were still expected to look beautiful; nay, it was a woman's obligation to the fighting men to do so. British women's attempt to fulfill such a "duty" contrasted sharply with Nazi stipulations that German women look "natural" and deny themselves any of the usual accoutrements of beauty or glamour. In contrast, British women, rich, middle class and poor, all crafted new ways in which to be both attractive and glamorous, while still being patriotic. This then entailed using less fabric, dressing more soberly and wearing scarves that extolled patriotic messages.

Post-war Life and Government Ideals in "Austere Britain"

Homefront support and ardent nationalism did not, however, last long in post-war Britain. The British government had promised its citizens a renewed state following the end of the war, but when the Germans surrendered, Britain did not emerge as the ideal nation depicted in wartime propaganda. Although Britain established a welfare state in the years following the war, as originally proposed in the Beveridge Report, the administration had far more work to do in order to provide greater equality and unity for its people. Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the public still believed in the promises implied by domestic propaganda. However, as the years passed in the 1940s with little to no change in government policies, people began to doubt the Labour party's guarantees and started to feel frustrated instead.

The end of the war promised the termination of the daily grind associated with the war years; yet the government's pledges proved hard to implement. The British

people had expected the Axis' defeat to bring a gradual end to the strict market controls that the government had put in place since 1939. Essentially, the rationing of food, clothing, and all consumer goods had produced a regulated market. And although there had been a "general agreement about the need for rationing and economic controls during the war and the immediate transition period" the Labour party maintained controls for much longer than the public expected. Indeed, as Zweiniger-Bargielowska put it, "the continuation of direct controls became controversial during the second half of the 1940s."⁴⁷ The Labour party deemed controls necessary because they were found to be a means of preventing inflation and wage-price spiraling. More important to the party, however, was the notion that fair shares enabled a more egalitarian society. However, what the Labour party neglected to realize was that British morale had become closely tied to the material conditions of life, a failure that would eventually cost them majority control of the government. Indeed, "the fact [emerged] again and again [that] the dependence of women [were] on the immediate, concrete things of life."⁴⁸ Shortages, restrictions, and controls – all now meant low morale.

In effect, during the war years, the very absence of consumer goods, and the population's willingness to endure such deprivations, had come to be equated with British virtue. The end of the war rewrote the terms of such a cultural equation so that British morale came be connected to the restoration of a consumer society, and a return to "the good life." Thus with the war over, the government could no longer justify shortages

⁴⁷ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955*: 65.

⁴⁸ Unknown, "Women in Wartime." 234.

and controls. Women in particular felt the deprivations of such a policy, because women were the shoppers for their families. Thus, women, more than men, eagerly anticipated the eradication of austerity measures. Hence, when rationing measures had not been removed by the late 1940s as expected, the British population began to publicly complain that it could no longer survive off dreams and promises.

Historian Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska's *Austerity in Britain*, the most thorough and quantitatively substantiated source on Britain's entire episode of rationing lasting from 1939 to 1955, best demonstrates the increasing emphasis British citizens placed on consumer goods. Through the analysis of polls recording personal attitudes and shopping behaviors in general, Zweiniger-Bargielowska proves British civilians yearned for tangible goods and the freedom to purchase whatever and however many of them as they pleased. However, because of government regulations, civilians were denied these wants. Instead, the historian notes, British citizens were subjected to a tightening of standards and the continuation of a policy that "contrasted sharply with immediate post-war expectations."⁴⁹

Zweiniger-Bargielowska shows that ironically enough, rationing measures on clothing were more severe in the post-war period than during the initial outbreak of the war. Clothes rationing began in 1939 at 66 coupons per person per annum, about two-thirds of pre-war consumption. In 1942 the rationing was reduced to 60 coupons and then to 48 in 1943. Two years later, in 1945, only 36 coupons were distributed. Eventually the government raised its policy on clothing to 48 coupons until 1948 when derationing

⁴⁹ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955*: 67.

slowly began until its abolition a year later.⁵⁰ Although clothes rationing was maintained only for four years following the war, a short period when compared to other types of controls, this extension was long enough to heighten discontentment and disillusionment, proved by the fact that in 1948 women scored “clothing difficulties” as one of their main family or personal problems.⁵¹ Because the majority of women had assumed such a policy would be eradicated following the end of the war, the mere extension of it augmented women’s frustrations and disheartenment.

The working class especially felt betrayed by such Labour politics. Although the political party considered rationing a beneficial instrument for equalizing society, British civilians did not positively connote such policies. Zweiniger-Bargielowska demonstrates that while public health did improve over these years, the “continuation of shortages...depressed morale after the war.”⁵² The decline in morale was not, however, so much a measure of actual deprivations, as a sign of the stark difference between post-war expectations and post-war realities. Ironically, the working-class had more means with which to purchase new goods,⁵³ but found themselves unable to do so due to shortages and rationing. Thus, the people’s “general confidence”⁵⁴ of a better post-war Britain dwindled.

Women above all felt the negative effects of rationing. Because they were responsible for managing the household by purchasing food, acquiring household items,

⁵⁰ Ibid: 49.

⁵¹ Ibid: 93.

⁵² Ibid: 66.

⁵³ Ibid: 68. Average income had risen by about a third during the interwar years.

⁵⁴ Ibid: 67.

and buying clothes for the whole family, women dealt with the controls on a daily basis. As one of Mass Observation's contemporary reports explains, "things women grumbled at" were "always the immediate, household problems of money, shopping." Thus, the "fact that [emerged] again and again [was] the dependence of women on the immediate, concrete things of life," so much so that a "woman's confidence, belief in future, hopes and fears, come down to this...the symbols of her life."⁵⁵ Unable to purchase as much or exactly what they wanted, women quickly grew resentful.

The extension of clothes rationing provoked even more complaints. During the war, women had dreamed of getting rid of utility clothing and purchasing new fashions; dress seemed even more important than food, housing, medical care and the like.⁵⁶ Such imagined and desired shopping sprees came to an abrupt halt when coupons allotted to clothing reached its lowest level in 1945. Thus clothes came to symbolize all of the shattered illusions women had regarding the post-war world. The British government failed to deliver that which it had promised during the war and the continued rationing of all consumer goods made such a realization ever more present and clear.

Furthermore, controls only served to highlight class tensions and not produce a more egalitarian society, or even the perception of one, as the government had intended. Despite a general improvement in living conditions, only the wealthy could afford to purchase either luxury goods or more ordinary items from the black market. The fact that the upper class could bypass the use of coupons or complement items bought with coupons by acquiring other goods with excess cash meant that austerity policies widened

⁵⁵ Unknown, "Women in Wartime."

⁵⁶ "Women's Clothes in Chester," (1944).

the gap between classes. Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues that rather quickly such sentiments developed into a “discontent progressively focused on the Labour government”⁵⁷ so that disappointment was aimed directly towards the government in place.

The “Britain Can Make It” exhibition clearly exposes the widening gap between the intent and the effect of the Labour government’s economic policies. Between September and November of 1946, the Council of Industrial Design sponsored the “Britain Can Make It” exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Established by the central government two years before, the Council aimed to “promote by all practical means the improvement of design in the products of British industry.”⁵⁸ While the exhibition intended to demonstrate to a wide audience British design’s prowess and modernity, the Council also aspired to promote “good design as means of social engineering.”⁵⁹ The products, ranging from kitchen appliances to dresses to furniture, and their presentation were meant to cultivate visitors’ taste and serve as propaganda that spread a certain understanding of Britain. As one scholar explained, the “good design discourse was undoubtedly linked to an idea of national regeneration and economic progress”⁶⁰ so that by embracing such British design, citizens would subscribe to the British government’s vision of the nation’s future. Yet, the messages embodied in the

⁵⁷ Ibid: 98.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Darling, "Exhibiting Britain: Display and National Identity 1946-1967," http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/learning/designingbritain/html/bcmi_intro.html.

⁵⁹ Stephen Hayward, "'Good Design Is Largely a Matter of Common Sense': Questioning the Meaning and Ownership of a Twentieth-Century Orthodoxy," *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 3 (1998): 225.

⁶⁰ Ibid: 230.

exhibition were not so new; in presenting Britain and its citizens as the world's morally responsible political player, the Council upheld wartime propaganda's depiction of the British people.

To a certain extent, visitors enjoyed the Council's efforts and designs. In particular, visitors from a design background regarded the exhibition as an achievement. The general public, however, expressed more mixed sentiments, captured in polls conducted by Mass Observation reporters throughout and following the exhibition. Of the almost 1.5 million visitors who attended the exhibit, Mass Observation reporters interviewed thousands. The exhibition crowd was "predominantly better off working-class" individuals, three-fifths of whom were under 40 years of age.⁶¹ Although nearly half of the visitors interviewed claimed they attended because they had a "general interest" of some sort, the "prestige reason" was the "feeling it's the 'done thing' to see 'Britain Can Make It' – to admit one had not been would be to lose face."⁶² Thus, duty compelled most artisan and upper working class individuals to attend the state-sponsored exhibition.

However, duty did not suffice in maintaining nationalist sentiments high among the people. Many of these visitors found the exhibition a detriment to morale rather than a boost to British spirits. In a 1947 article reflecting on contemporary public opinions of "Britain Can Make It," Tom Harrisson, Director of Mass Observation, reported that the British had been "puzzled" by the exhibition. Harrisson had been principally struck by two factors. These were the "amazement among visitors...so short of consumer goods

⁶¹ "'Britain Can Make It' Exhibition; Section A," (December, 1946).

⁶² Ibid: 12.

could go in hundreds of thousands to see the most desired things displayed and marked FOR EXPORT ONLY” and the “British self-discipline” in not complaining about “the fact that they might have to wait years before getting things.” Harrison considered this self-discipline, in the face of so many goods unavailable to them, the very essence of being British, an attribute he labeled as apathy. Harrison remarked, “how pointless all [British] individual efforts of 1940-47 seem now to be”⁶³ with no end in sight to austerity measures and the overall ill will in world affairs. However, Harrison failed to realize that British working class individuals were not unaware of and unaffected by their situation. Rather, British working class individuals were disappointed and beginning to act upon their disenchantment with contemporary circumstances through one means or another.

Growing dissatisfaction with the Labour government’s policies and inability to satisfy British working-class aspirations indicated a shift from wartime attitudes. Visitors “actively disliked”⁶⁴ several of the exhibition’s sections intended to promote British tastes, especially the furniture and dresses display. Contrary to the Council’s intent to inspire exhibition goers, the majority of visitors said “they had been uninfluenced in their taste by the exhibition.”⁶⁵ Moreover, visitors expressed fatigue with the utility look⁶⁶ and even if visitors liked certain objects, 43% of those interviewed believed they could never own such items.⁶⁷ A vast majority of individuals attending the exhibit did not seriously consider purchasing any of the items shown, in part because no prices were displayed and

⁶³ Ibid: 334.

⁶⁴ Ibid: 85.

⁶⁵ Ibid: 47.

⁶⁶ Ibid: 89.

⁶⁷ Ibid: 57.

in part because austerity measures were still in place. Even worse, the “FOR EXPORT ONLY” sign clearly warned that products on display were not even intended for the British people. Thanks to this sign, the “Britain Can Make It” exhibition came to be dubbed the “Britain Cannot Have It” showcase. “Britain Can Make It” teased the working class, the very people whose sacrifices had sustained the war effort. The Council-sponsored exhibition seemed to make the ration-free future workers sought an unattainable dream. British responsibility and morality, propagated first by the MOI’s domestic posters and then maintained by the Council’s exhibition, did not grant that which British workers desired most: a more equal and promising Britain.

Ironically enough, Harrison discerned the people’s mounting frustrations, but failed to realize the political consequences of such a change in opinion. Harrison sensed the British were disillusioned from the polls’ evidence, which indicated a “steady...quantitative decline in the popularity of the government” as “people urgently want something to live for and look forward to,”⁶⁸ but increasingly felt the administration in place could not provide. Despite such evidence of discontent, Harrison believed that there was “no reason to suppose that any change would particularly favour the Conservative party.”⁶⁹ Here, however, Harrison was wrong, for he underestimated the public’s dissatisfaction with the Labour party; only four years following his article, the Conservative party would gain the seats necessary to win control over Parliament.

British citizens were not apathetic, as Harrison believed them to be; rather they were disheartened. Harrison merely noted the fact that personal activities, especially

⁶⁸ Ibid: 335.

⁶⁹ Ibid: 334.

“citizen-conscious”⁷⁰ ones, were on the rise, but did not link this surging personal action with a renewed sense of political self-awareness and individuality. With the growing feeling that the Labour party could not provide for its citizens, individuals took it upon themselves to effect change. Although Harrisson understood that the Britain of his day was “more complicated than she has ever been...traditional ways and moods...survive, while some of the things around which those ways and moods are built are (or appear to be) crumbling,”⁷¹ he was unable or perhaps unwilling to perceive such an insight as an indication of the people’s growing doubts about the government’s ability to control narratives regarding British identity and ideology. Rising dissent with Labour party politics and dissatisfaction with the current situation would increasingly come to be embodied by individuals who sought to secure the future they envisioned for themselves.

Dior’s New Look

As British disenchantment with the administration gained strength, Christian Dior was in the midst of creating his first collection in Paris, one that would scandalize the fashion world of 1947. Christian Dior established his couture house in 1946 and launched his first collection, Corolle,⁷² in February of 1947. Carmel Snow, editor-in-chief of Harper’s Bazaar, coined Dior’s collection the New Look, because it stood as a drastic departure from wartime fashions. Boxy, straight, and constricted lines that had defined the utility look turned into voluptuous and sinuous silhouettes. Dior’s collection emphasized volume and elegance. The designer sensed that women, not just French ones,

⁷⁰ Ibid: 338.

⁷¹ Ibid: 340.

⁷² The botanical term for the circlet of the petals of a flower, which reflects the voluminous shape Dior strived for in his designs.

but *all* women desired and needed a new aesthetic following the war years. In his autobiography Dior wrote, “It was true that I was a French couturier, but I had to understand the needs of elegant woman all over the world as well as my fellow countrywomen”⁷³ in order to design his collections. Corolle or the New Look was one for all women to adopt.



Figure 6. Dior's New Look Skirt, 1947.

To achieve the intended shapely effect of his collection, Dior required tremendous amounts of fabric (Figure 6). Because rationing standards could not be maintained in creating a New Look skirt, the style initially outraged certain populations. As one of Dior's biographers explained, for some women “the New Look came as an insult to the very existence of the millions of women living amid the ruins of Europe.”⁷⁴ Initially, many women interpreted the New Look as a slap in the face of women who had experienced the war's ravages and been cut off from necessities for so long. The British government even “requested the British Guild of Creative Designers to boycott the Paris styles” since “the New Look was considered yet another act of irresponsibility on the part

⁷³ Christian Dior, *Dior by Dior: The Autobiography of Christian Dior* (London: V&A Publications, 2007): 31.

⁷⁴ Farid Chenoune, *Dior* (New York: Assouline, 2007): 20.

of France.”⁷⁵ The British government sought to distance itself and its citizens from immoral French behavior and reassert British virtue, of which frugality was a part, or at least according to the government. Yet the fact remained that British women could not adopt these styles even if they wanted to because austerity measures were still in place.

It was not, however, the liberal use of fabric alone that caused complaint. In Chicago, a group of women rallied together to denounce the length of Dior’s skirts, because they perceived it to be a return to old-fashions. These women felt that the New Look reversed gains made during the war; such women deemed shorter skirts a measure of women’s new freedom. The utility look had served some women as a reform measure and a way to overturn traditional strictures on behavior. Dior’s New Look upturned all of these notions. By reviving a longer dress style, Dior returned to a more conventional era, providing critics yet another reason for reproach.

Nevertheless, the resistance against Dior’s fashion was short-lived. By the end of 1947, Dior’s New Look was undeniably popular. As museum curators Adelheid Rasche and Christina Thomson explain, “Even in Germany – a country ravaged by war that the state of its economy beggars description- response to the New Look was soon forthcoming.”⁷⁶ The New Look gained devout adherents as women from all Western countries sought to have the style for themselves. “It has become a mania,” observed a female diarist in 1948. The “New Look has won its way,”⁷⁷ she continued. Just as Dior found his New Look skirts and dresses to be a return to “an ideal of civilized

⁷⁵ Batterberry, *Mirror, Mirror: A Social History of Fashion*: 348.

⁷⁶ *Christian Dior and Germany*, ed. Adelheid Rasche with Christina Thomson (Arnoldsche, 2007): 34.

⁷⁷ Unknown, “A Report on the New Look,” (Mass Observation, 1949): 3.

contentment,”⁷⁸ so too did women of various nations seek to erase the war years from their memory. Dior aspired to “restore a damaged ideal of...femininity, to repair it with the New Look,”⁷⁹ and women responded well to his proposal. The New Look intended not to revert to the past directly, but rather to reinstate the idealisms from the past. The standstill and suffering of the war were to be replaced with notions of hope, elegance, and femininity that had been lost.

Naturally, even if the designer intended his creations to be for women of any nation, not all women could afford to purchase a Dior dress or skirt. Nonetheless, this did not prevent working class women from adopting the New Look for themselves. More than others, however, British working class women had to be creative in order to wear something of the New Look fashion, because they were still subjected to the government’s austerity policies. The war had afforded some women practice because they had to learn how to “make do” in order to cope with increasingly stricter rationing levels. Countless remarks in diaries recorded by Mass Observation argued that coupons handed out annually by the government never sufficed; women had to constantly scramble in order to produce wearable outfits. Moreover, because the wartime utility fashions were often so unattractive and uncomfortable, despite the government’s efforts to make the look appealing, women had taken to mending their own clothing as opposed to purchasing new ones. Many British women wrote of “patching up” corsets or other such garments because utility ones would simply not do. Even more predictive of women’s behavior in the postwar years were the many comments in wartime diaries

⁷⁸ Chenoune, *Dior*: 39.

⁷⁹ Ibid: 48.

stating women “would be willing to pay quite a high price for something they felt would be lasting and comfortable.”⁸⁰ Women’s discontent with utility fashions most likely contributed to the enthusiasm they showed for the luxurious dresses inspired by Dior.

In fact, right after the war, British working class women reported that they aspired to buy *first*, before and above all, “really nice garments,”⁸¹ a notion echoed in several female wartime diaries. Following the war years, women yearned for a level of quality and style that transgressed the limits imposed by the uncomfortable and uninspired utility designs. Quality, even if at a premium, came to be valued over price.

The case of Horrockses Fashions, a popular fashion line of the mid twentieth century, epitomizes this notion. Established in 1946, Horrockses promoted cotton manufacturer Crewdson & Company Limited’s products. With the widening use of cotton dresses thanks to the limitation of fabrics imposed by the war, Horrockses quickly became a recognized British label. Because Dior used cotton to make many of his dresses, it was easy for Horrockses to “quickly [take] up the style” for its own collections, “although with less extravagant use of fabric.”⁸² Horrockses’ well-loved pieces were inspired by Dior’s New Look and were deemed to be of the highest caliber.⁸³ Although the price of a Horrockses garment was still relatively high, and supposedly beyond that of a working class budget, women of all social strata purchased Horrockses items. In fact, working class women reported that they were willing to “scrimp and save

⁸⁰ Ibid: 20.

⁸¹ Ibid: 7.

⁸² Christine Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions: Off-the-Peg Style in the '40s and '50s* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010): 160.

⁸³ Ibid: 163.

to purchase just one”⁸⁴ because they were seen as well-made and thus considered good value for their price. But in 1947 Britain, austerity measures were still in place. Even if women wanted to splurge on some luxuries, most could not afford to do so or could do so only occasionally. They thus had to find other ways to have the New Look style.

The preferred manner to recreate the New Look was for women to make the skirts themselves or to alter old garments to resemble Dior’s line. Home sewing in this age was still a commonplace, since ready-made clothes were not yet widespread. As Professor Barbara Burman explained, in 1940s and 1950s Britain, “it [was] evident...how important clothing and home dressmaking were within working-class households and how they were used to uphold family and community standards of appearance and respectability.”⁸⁵ Because ready-made clothing was still not widely used or trusted, British working-class families, and namely the women of the families, took it upon themselves to mend and design clothing to suit their needs and keep up appearances.

Home dressmakers constantly patched-up and revived items. Thus Burman argues, the “English home dressmaker...could modernize her wardrobe through strategic changes and additions in order to keep it resonant with fashion”⁸⁶ of the day such as Dior’s New Look. Women found ingenious ways to lower their utility skirts in order to mimic the length of New Look ones. Another scholar describes one technique often used: “For suits with longer jackets, dropping the skirt on a yoke could add four or more inches

⁸⁴ Ibid: 161.

⁸⁵ Barbara Burman, "'What a Deal of Work There Is in a Dress!' Englishness and Home Dressmaking in the Age of the Sewing Machine," in *Englishness of English Dress*, ed. Christopher Conekin Breward and Caroline Becky Cox (London: Berg Publishers, 2002): 84.

⁸⁶ Ibid: 89.

to the hem length,⁸⁷ so that a New Look aesthetic could come to be achieved with clothing items already found in the closet. The yoke was a best seller⁸⁸ because it enabled skirts to adopt the New Look doctrine at a low cost. Women then increased volume by adding scrap materials so that no piece of fabric was left unused in mimicking New Look designs.

Because British working-class women created New Look fashions in their homes, women adopted the style in stages. As Burman explains, the British home dressmaker could “produce New Look styles and frocks as time and resources allowed”⁸⁹ so that the style came to be an evolution of identity. With more fabric and time to create their pieces, British women came to make the New Look their own style and thereby increased its popularity and visibility. In an interview with one such British home dressmaker, Burman writes of the joy with which the interviewee described home dressmaking. The home dressmaker recounts feeling good in her New Look style creations,⁹⁰ wearing her items for years only to take bits and pieces of it to then create other, new items. Such a connection experienced in producing clothing items empowered British working class women, and enabled them to “define their appearance very closely.”⁹¹ Even though the style was created by a French male couturier, the New Look came to be a fashion for British working class women as they gradually incorporated the style into their wardrobe,

⁸⁷ Jonathan Walford, *Forties Fashion: From Siren Suits to the New Look* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008): 195.

⁸⁸ Walford supplies this information.

⁸⁹ Burman, "'What a Deal of Work There Is in a Dress!' Englishness and Home Dressmaking in the Age of the Sewing Machine.": 90.

⁹⁰ Ibid: 91.

⁹¹ Ibid: 91.

signifying their active engagement in defining their style and their selves.

Carolyn Steedman's memoir illuminates the vital role clothing played for women in constructing and expressing their social and political identities. Born in 1947, or as Steedman describes it "in the year of the New Look,"⁹² into a British working class family, Steedman was raised by a mother from a traditional Labour background and an absent father who worked in manual labor. *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* is more than Steedman's autobiography and memoir of her mother; rather "it is about people wanting those things, and the structures of political thought that have labeled this wanting as wrong."⁹³ Steedman tells the story of growing up in a household of want, which was representative of British working class homes in the late 1940s to early 1950s. Because people held the government accountable for their inability to satisfy their desires, their needs quickly instigated political action. The quotation that began my thesis expresses this view perfectly. When introducing her mother to the reader, Steedman writes:

"What she wanted were real things, real entities, things she materially lacked, things that a culture and social system withheld from her...when the world didn't deliver the goods, she held the world to blame. In this way, the story she told was a form of political analysis, that allows a political interpretation to be made of her life."⁹⁴

The desire for tangible items, and particularly new fashions, which the administration's austerity measures denied them, mobilized women; in fact, they became politicized and blamed the government for denying them the material goods they yearned after. "It was with the image of a New Look coat that, in 1950, [Steedman] made [her] first attempt to

⁹² Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*: 29.

⁹³ Ibid: 23.

⁹⁴ Ibid: 6.

understand and symbolize the content of [her] mother's desire."⁹⁵ From a very early age, Steedman could sense the value her mother placed on clothing and materiality, and would gradually come to understand the role such articles played in developing and expressing British working class women's relationship to the social and political world.

However, such material goods were a double-edged sword for working class women. The New Look skirt stood for all that women such as Steedman's mother desired, and yet was the embodiment of that which was denied to them. As Steedman explains, "the proliferation of consumer goods that marked the mid-1950s, were used by [her] mother to measure out her discontent: there existed a newly expanding and richly endowed material world in which she was denied a place,"⁹⁶ so that all the author's mother sought could not be had. Class, penury, and rationing measures combined to thwart her passions. Yet, Steedman's mother and other such women could not resist in trying to be part of this tantalizing and expanding material world. By one means or another, Steedman's mother and those "born into 'the old working class'" could not help but want "a New Look skirt, a timbered country cottage, [and] to marry a prince."⁹⁷ Dior's New Look skirt was more than the latest fashion; it was a representation of an idyllic life.

The New Look bore the same meaning for much of working-class Britain. Anne Summers argued it was "a moment in fashion history [that] occupied a sacred place...in

⁹⁵ Ibid: 24.

⁹⁶ Ibid: 36.

⁹⁷ Ibid: 9.

its British materialization it represented all of the earliest notions of female beauty.”⁹⁸ For Summers, Dior’s New Look emphasized ideals of femininity, beauty, and dreams. In describing the New Look inspired dress she wore to her sister’s wedding, Summers recalls feeling like Cinderella, the fairy tale in which the protagonist living in unfortunate circumstances comes to be a princess by landing a prince of her own. The dress’ ability to turn Summers into a Cinderella captures the message sent by Dior’s New Look. What one wore signaled one’s social, cultural, and political standing. “The quality of cloth...care in making-up were not just aspects of getting a living, but a set of references virtually amounting to a moral code”⁹⁹ that would be judged by all. What one valued in fashion served as a metaphor for identity itself.

The voluminous skirt that snubbed rationing standards stood for a carefree and peaceful existence. Dior’s New Look aesthetic embodied the post-war world the British Labour administration had promised but failed to deliver. Moreover, it also was the one conceivable goal amongst the list of dreams. Even if most working class women could not afford a Dior skirt, an individual could purchase a copy or fashion one for herself. Her prince may never come, her house never lived in, but a woman “even of the old-working class,” could wear something of the New Look style by one way or another. She just had to do so for herself, because the post-war years demonstrated that no other being, organization, or administration would do so for her.

Thus when a woman bought or made a skirt in the New Look style, she made a

⁹⁸ Anne Summers, "On Begging to Be a Bridesmaid in a Ballerina Dress: Some Meanings of British Fashion in the 1950s," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 44 (1997): 228.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

political statement. As historian Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska demonstrates, “the depth of female disaffection is illustrated by the rapid adoption of the New Look, characterized by long, flowing skirts, in the face of official condemnation in the late 1940s. While rationing and high prices precluded extensive purchases, women altered their existing clothes by adding waistbands or dropping hems in order to acquire the New Look.”¹⁰⁰ Choice in dress became politicized as it grew to be an act of defiance. The New Look stood as a rejection of the government’s policies and rationing standards. In this regard, women’s self-procurement or production of a New Look item became a political act.

Steedman’s memoir explains how an individual stemming from a traditional Labour background, constricted firmly in the working class, could come to vote for the Conservative party and take part in its gaining of the British government in 1951. Because in the immediate post-war years the Left failed to realize the vision for Britain it had promised during the war years, working-class citizens turned to the Right for the world it desired. Steedman’s “mother rejected the politics of solidarity and communality, always voted Conservative, for the left could not embody her desire for things to be *really* fair, for a full skirt that took twenty yards...for a prince who did not come.”¹⁰¹ Fed up with unfulfilled visions of the future and dissatisfied with the lack of retribution for sacrifices made during the war, working-class members turned to the other end of the political spectrum in hopes that it would procure the equality and comfort they desired.

Fashion echoed this turn to individuality, as it fell on the individual to find the

¹⁰⁰ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955*: 92.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*: 47.

means to either purchase or create a New Look skirt or dress. Steedman's mother's political allegiance to the Conservative wing was not a "tired acceptance of the status quo...[it was] radical...a matter of defiance"¹⁰² of that which was typical and supposedly in tune with her background. Frustrated with her situation in life, Steedman's mother did not accept her circumstances, rather she "did what the powerless...have done before, and do still: she worked on her body, the only bargaining power she ended up with, given the economic times and culture in which she grew."¹⁰³ Dior's New Look skirt embodied the dissatisfaction with failed promises, and a yearning for the Britain working-class women had been pledged.

Conclusion

Coco Chanel, the legendary early twentieth century designer, once proclaimed, "Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening."¹⁰⁴ Clothing is not merely a material object, but an embodiment of everything that defines an individual. By confining clothing and fashion to cultural studies, scholars ignore the fact that "the way we live" and "what is happening" all around us are defined by our social and political circumstances as well. As Steedman elucidates towards the end of her memoir, by allowing what could be interpreted as working class envy of the higher classes' access to goods "entry into political understanding, the proper struggles of people in a state of dispossession to gain their inheritance might be seen not as sordid and mindless greed for

¹⁰² Ibid: 115.

¹⁰³ Ibid: 141.

¹⁰⁴ "Coco Chanel Quotes,"

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/coco_chanel.html.

the things of the market place, but attempts to alter a world that has produced in them states of unfulfilled desire.”¹⁰⁵ In order to reach this enlightened conclusion, however, scholars must examine these objects themselves in the same manner in which they probe critical texts.

Steedman’s and Chanel’s insights demonstrate the intrinsic connections found between British working class women’s mounting frustration with Labour party politics and their adoption of Dior’s New Look. Both women make plain that then and now, the clothing items women choose to make, wear, and purchase capture the cultural, political, and social mood specific to the environment in which they live. It is now the historian’s responsibility to stitch clothing items along with textual sources in order to discern individuals’ voices.

¹⁰¹ Steedman. *Landscape for a Good Woman*: 123.

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